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GOD WITH US

"The Orthodox Christmas services have to be changed. They don't reflect our modern life. We don't sing any familiar Christmas carols and the only thing we hear over and over again is 'God is with us.' Perhaps if they were explained to me, I would get more out of the services."

This is a quote from a letter I received in which the writer was sincerely trying to analyze why church attendance is so low in churches even though the Nativity is celebrated on December 25.

In a fourth century sermon, St. John Chrysostom, who wrote the Divine Liturgy which is served on the Nativity, preached the following sermon:

"What shall I say! And how shall I describe the Birth to you? For this wonder fills me with astonishment. The Ancient of Days has become an infant. He who sits upon the sublime and heavenly throne, now lies in a manger. And He who cannot be touched, who is simple, without complexity, and incorporeal, now lies subject to the hands of men. He who has broken the bonds of sinners, is now bound by an infant's bands. But He has decreed that ignominy shall become honor, infamy be clothed with glory, and total humiliation (be) the measure of His goodness."

Amen! The Nativity/Christmas story, rightly understood, should fill our hearts with praise. First, we see many Old Testament prophecies fulfilled. Isaiah had foretold the virgin birth of the Messiah (Matt 1:23); Isa 7:14).

Micah said that His birthplace would be in Bethlehem (Matt 2:6; Micah 5:2).

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O inexpressible mystery
and unheard-of paradox;
the Invisible is seen;
the Intangible is touched;
the Eternal Word becomes
accessible to our speech;
the Timeless steps into time;
the Son of God becomes the
Son of Man.

HIS NATIVITY

"Thy Nativity, O Christ our God, has shown to the world the light of wisdom. For by it those who worshipped the stars were taught by a star to adore Thee, the Sun of Righteousness and to know Thee the Orient from on high. O Lord glory to Thee."

We hear this hymn (tropar) sung over and over again during the Christmas Season. What does it mean?

"Those who worship the stars" – the Magi represent the scientists of antiquity. They are taught by the stars, and because of a star, they set out in search of a newborn king. Instead, they find a child lying on straw. They told Herod that they

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CHRISTMAS EVE SUPPER

The most important meal for many during the Christmas season is the "Holy Supper," served on Christmas Eve. The foods and customs regarding this meal differed from village to village and family to family and became the heritage of our families today. However, it is celebrated, it is important to take time as a family and to share this meal complete with its religious significance. It is a means of a reaffirming and realizing God's love for the world and also a means of learning to love and be loved through the family.

The Christmas Eve Supper begins when the first star appears in the eastern sky at sundown. This is symbolic of the Star of Bethlehem, guiding us to Christ's presence. Hay or straw is placed under the white tablecloth symbolizing the manger. This is modified in many homes today by placing a bit of hay or straw on a tray and covering it with a white napkin. Wheat in a vase is placed in the ikon corner as a symbol of good harvest or fortune. A candle is placed in the center of the table symbolizing Christ is the Light of the World. The mother lights the candle at the beginning of the supper and extinguishes it at the end. As the table is set, an extra setting is made for the stranger who may come. Some people say that it is set in memory of those who are no longer with us.

The father calls all to the table. They stand at their place and the tropar is said or better still sung. "Thy Nativity, O Christ our God, has shone to the world the light of wisdom! For by it, those who worshipped the stars were taught by a star to adore Thee, the Sun of Righteousness, and to know Thee, the Orient from on high.

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CHRONOLOGY

DECEMBER 2004

DIED: Matushka Irene Soroka, wife of Fr. Igor Soroka in Donora, PA.
Pani Julia Barany, widow of Fr. Paul Barany in McHenry, IL.

QUESTIONS HAVE BEEN raised about building a Russian Orthodox Church at the site of Middle School No. 1 in Brislin, where a siege by pro-Chechen guerrillas killed more than 330 people. Many non-Orthodox were among those killed at the spot.

THE PATRIARCH OF ALEXANDRIA was killed in a helicopter crash on September 11. The 55-year-old was on his way to Mt. Athos with 12 staff members. They all perished in the Aegean Sea. Elected in 1997, he spent much energy traveling throughout Africa doing missionary work and seeing membership rising to a level not seen since Roman times.

THE SYNOD OF THE SERBIAN ORTHODOX CHURCH, meeting in Belgrade, called on the government of Serbia and Montenegro to enact laws for the return of illegally confiscated properties of the Serbian Orthodox Churches and other religious communities and of citizens as soon as possible and in the interim to prohibit the sale and destruction of the property, which is to be returned.

IN THE AFTERMATH OF THE HURRICANES, the International Orthodox Christian Charities (IOCC) is helping to find housing for those who cannot return to their homes. At the time they set up shelter for people, mostly elderly and with special needs. The IOCC has an emergency response network, consisting of trained Orthodox priests, which provides for emergency service to people struggling to recover from natural or man-made disasters. Donations may be sent to IOCC, Hurricane Relief, PO Box 630225, Baltimore, MD 21263-0225. For info or help call toll free 1-877-803-4622.

THE NEW PATRIARCH OF ALEXANDRIA has been elected. Patriarch-elect Theodoros, 50 years old, was born on the island of Crete. He first served there as a priest in the 70's. He became bishop of Zimbabwe in 2002. He will replace Patriarch Petros VII, who died in the helicopter accident. He will head the 300,000 member church. It is second among Orthodox just behind Constantinople.

A MEMORIAL SERVICE WAS HELD at the site of the destroyed St. Nicholas Church in New York City at Ground Zero. It was possible to pray for 33 Greek Orthodox by name. It has been revealed that no further access to the site will be possible for at least six years because of construction slated to take place in the area.

RAG DOLLS 2 LOVE is an ecumenical project which includes making simple rag dolls for children around the world, especially in countries ravaged by war. For more info, including a pattern, go to www.ragdolls2love.org or e-mail ragdolls2love2003@yahoo.org.

YEARS AGO THE MOISEYEV DANCE COMPANY entertained many in the U.S. This foremost Russian folkloric dance company is returning in January 1/26 to Atlanta, GA (404-804-9600) and 1/22 to Gainesville, FL (352-392-2787) and in February 2/17 to Minneapolis, MN (612-624-2345).

SEVENTY-FIVE YEARS AGO on December 6, 1929, the Soviet government issued a decree which forbade all bell-ringing in the Soviet State and commanded that all bells be removed from church bell towers and be melted down to help industry. Thousands of bells were destroyed, yet these repressions did not wipe out Russian bell-working traditions.

DEMONSTRATIONS AGAINST THE ECUMENICAL PATRIARCHATE have taken place at the world headquarters in Istanbul. Over 1000 ultranationalists protested the reopening of Halki Seminary, foreigners buying property in Turkey, and an interview Patriarch Bartholomew made to Reuters in which he complained about the church continuing to face legal and administrative obstacles despite government reforms. Turkey wishes to enter the EU and religious freedom is high on the agenda. Days later another cathedral and other buildings in the compound were damaged in an explosion.

AN ONLINE SITE FOR AN ORTHODOX LITURGICAL MUSIC RESOURCE has been awarded a grant of $15,000 from the William H. Farah Foundation to address the need for a central resource of liturgical music. PSALM (Pan-Orthodox Society for the Advancement of Liturgical Music) is coordinating the efforts. For info: www.orthodoxpsalm.org or e-mail info@orthodoxpsalm.org

PATRIARCH ALEXY sent a message to his parishes meeting in the U.S. stating that rapprochement with the Church Abroad would help with pastoral care of Russians living in the U.S. either permanently or temporarily.

AN ITEM IN THE VIGIL stated that Archbishop Job offered an opinion that it is crucial for the OCA and its Holy Synod to assert themselves as the autocephalous Church in America in view of the coming rapprochement of the Moscow Patriarchate and Church Abroad.

ARCHBISHOP DEMETRIOS of the Greek Archdiocese offered prayers at both the Democratic and Republican Conventions. He offered the benediction at the Democratic Convention in Boston and an invocation at the Republican Convention in New York.

SPONSOR A COLLEGE STUDENT for $200 at the College Conference to be held from Dec. 27-31 at Antiochian Village, near Pittsburgh, PA, where Orthodox youth of all jurisdictions will meet. For info visit www.ocf.net.

IS ORTHODOX FUNDAMENTALISM overtaking the Orthodox Church?

GOD WITH US

Hosea had spoken of a time spent
(Continued from front page)
in Egypt (Matt 2:15; Hosea 11:1).

Jeremiah had foreseen the horrifying violence of Herod (Matt 2:18; Jeremiah 31:15).

And various prophets had indicated the Messiah would be "despised," or in Jesus' day, the equivalent of being "called a Nazarene" (Matt 2:23; Isaiah 53:3).

We also rejoice because God intervened in miraculous ways throughout the Christmas story. Jesus was born of a virgin - somehow, the Holy Spirit engineered His conception outside of the normal means (Matt 1:18). Angels, who are God's messengers, delivered several special announcements. And how did the Magi know where and when to come to find the newborn King? God was clearly at work in their knowledge, the star they followed, and the dream, warning them not to tell Herod.

Most of all, we worship the Son of God, who for our sake became human. Why did He do it? To save us from our sins (Matt 1:21). To show God's love to the world and to bring light to all peoples (the Magi were foreigners). And to become "GOD IS WITH US" (Matt 1:23), a phrase that succinctly captures the mystery and wonder of the Incarnation.

These are the reasons that in the Orthodox Church we repeat over and over again "God is with us."

(Continued from front page)

HIS NATIVITY

wanted to do homage to the King of the Jews, but when they find the child they are filled with great joy, and instead of merely doing formal homage, they adore Him.

These wise men who came from the East found Truth itself, which they had always sought in the stars. Now they recognize the Sun of Righteousness, the "Orient from on high," which has come down from heaven. But this heaven is not the same one which was formed in the first days of creation, the one in which stars revolve, for these stars could give only a partial knowledge to the Magi, while the Sun of Righteousness is uncreated.

The Light of Knowledge reveals God Himself. "The Orient from on high," who makes Himself known to the Magi is the divine Word who was with God in the beginning, who is Himself God before all ages (John 1:1). He is One who existed before time and before the creation of all matter.

Like the Magi, we are overwhelmed by a great joy: "O Lord, glory to Thee!"

Continued from front page)

CHRISTMAS EVE SUPPER

O Lord, Glory to Thee!"

Everyone sits down to eat. They must, at least, taste every dish which has been prepared. Everything is made without meat or dairy products, because it is a strict fast day. The meal is served in courses and usually consists of 12 dishes served in honor of the 12 Apostles.

In our home, which follows ancient Belarus customs, we start the meal with kutia, boiled grain sweetened with poppyseed and honey. While this is eaten, the father or elder reminds us of those who were at the table with us in previous years but are no longer here with us. But symbolically as the grain lives on so do their souls. In other homes bread, dipped in garlic, sweetened with honey, or a small loaf of bread, broken and passed out by the father, starts the meal.

Other dishes may include a soup or several soups such as borsch, sauerkraut, mushroom, lima bean, dried pea, caraway or rice and mushroom.

This is followed by various fish dishes, lenten perohi, lenten holuptsi, vegetables, potatoes mashed with sauteed onion, mushroom, bobalky, etc.

For dessert almost all traditions call for stewed dried fruit and nuts.

The rest of the evening is spent in "quiet time" until leaving for Church services.

HOW IT CAME TO BE

How was it decided to include the books which are in the Bible as we know it today? There obviously were many more books or manuscripts written.

The agreed list of books to be included and the order in which they were to be arranged was a gradual process. While the broad outline was settled upon as early as the end of the second century, there were differences in various areas.

What were the considerations taken in reaching a decision? There were at least three features which the books had to have. The first was that it had to be proven to come from the pen of an apostle or to have the authority of an apostle behind it.

Sometimes, books which were considered were used in some places but there remained some doubt of their meeting the criteria given in the first place and they were ultimately dropped. They include such familiar books as the Didache and Hermas' Shepherd.

Then there were books, which were included along the way, but had to wait some time for recognition by the whole church. For example, the West held Hebrews under suspicion for a long time. It was silent about James until the latter part of the 4th century, and it was doubtful whether 2 Peter, 2 and 3 John and Jude would ever be approved. The book of Revelation was in doubt for many centuries and the East, that is Orthodox Church, even at this time does not use it in any liturgical service.

Gradually, the churches of both East and West arrived at a common mind as to what should be included. It was St. Athanasius in his Pascha Letter of the year 367 which listed the 27 books of the New Testament as canonical. However, it was not until a century and a half later that it was universally accepted.

* * * * * *

The most highly flammable kind of wood is the chip on the shoulder.

COMING TO AMERICA

Baba was just eighteen when she left Stupnitza, Galicia, with her cousins Mikhail and *malenka* Hanje ("little" Annie). They traveled overland to Hamburg, Germany, where they boarded a ship to America. For two weeks, they endured cramped and unsanitary conditions in the hold of the ship. On the 16th of February, 1910, the three young people arrived in the port of New York with few personal possessions but many hopes of earning money to help their struggling families back home.

For the next four years, Baba worked in the households of several Russian Jewish families. Although the work was difficult and most employers proved to be demanding, and sometimes cruel, Baba had an important reason to continue. As she told me many years later, "One dollar here would be worth two dollars and fifty cents in the village. I kept just a little for myself and sent the rest to my parents to help with my seven brothers and sisters."

Many immigrants intended to work in America for a few years and then return home. This was Baba's plan. Then she met a man named Ivan, who was from the village of Luzhok, only four km from her own home in Stupnitza. They were married just two weeks after they met.

Baba's story was not unique. In fact, it probably mirrors the experiences of many immigrants who arrived in this country from the 1880s to just prior to World War I. One thing was a constant with nearly all who arrived. Whether they lived in a coal-mining town in Pennsylvania or in the shadow of a steel mill along the Great Lakes or in a large city along the East coast, the Church was the center of their lives. Not only did the churches fulfill the spiritual needs of the faithful, but they also served as centers for social functions and education for the youth. Today, many of us are fortunate to be members of the parishes that were built by those early immigrants.

Since then, there have been several waves of immigration to the United States, most notably following World War II. As with those who had preceded them, these newcomers, also, sought out the Church in their new home.

Today, immigrants continue to arrive in the U.S. with hopes for better lives. Due to government restrictions, though, quotas are now set for countries around the world on how many people can enter the U.S. in any given year. Preference is given to refugees of war and those who have left their homeland due to persecution. For millions more who are trapped in poverty, the Green Card "lottery" may be the only hope they have in leaving their circumstances.

The world is a very different place than it was when Baba came to America. Immigrants now arrive in New York by plane in a matter of hours. Some already have college degrees and have knowledge of the English language and American customs. For a fortunate number of them, agencies and church-related organizations may offer assistance in providing housing, language instruction, and employment.

For many of those new to America, there is a great desire to assimilate as quickly as possible. Instead of seeking out people of their own Faith as immigrants once did, they may join an "American" church or, perhaps, just look for a church only when one is needed. There are those Faithful, though, who want to participate in the full life of the Church. Establishing Outreach Ministries in our parishes specifically for immigrants would be a very positive step in welcoming those newly arrived into our communities.

I try to imagine what it was like to be an eighteen-year-old all alone in a foreign country. All I know is that I could never have been that strong or brave. And almost a hundred years later, I'm very grateful to that young girl named Magdalyna for leaving her home and family to come to America.

Margaret Pysarchyk

STILL IN LENT

For most of December we are in a Lenten or Fasting period, which began on November 15/28. It is a time of preparation for Christmas or the Nativity of Christ. The secular world has started to prepare us long before this day. We have only to go to our local mall and we will find it beautifully decorated and will hear Christmas music. We are bombarded with ideas for Christmas gifts, for Christmas entertaining and decorations. Our usual response to all this is to complain that they are rushing the season.

Perhaps it is time for us to take another view of this. The secular world is doing us a favor! It is informing us that the time for our spiritual preparation is at hand. Let's start getting ready for the coming of Christ.

How do we do this? Fasting is the true preparation for the coming of Christ. Fasting includes prayer, repentance, doing good to others, as well as dietary restrictions. If we take the time to prepare for Christ in our souls, hearts and minds, then all these other things which the secular world brings will have some meaning for us, and they will be worth doing. We will not complain about Christmas being all about big business, materialistic, and false glitter, because we know that Christmas is more.

The important place to prepare for the Lord isn't the house and its decorations, but our souls, hearts, minds and bodies, so that Jesus will find in us a worthy place to lay His Head.

LIGHTER MOMENT

How can you be happy in heaven when you are miserable in God's house here?

* * * * * *

St. Nicholas, a bishop of Myra in the 4th century, is one of the best-loved saints. He was the original "Santa Claus," and in many countries of Europe presents were exchanged on December 6/19, his feast day. From Europe the lovely custom of giving gifts came to America.

SINGING AND CHRISTMAS

The first Christmas carol was sung by the angelic chorus on that first Christmas Eve over two thousand years ago. Fortunate were the shepherds who heard them.

Among the Russian and Carpatho-Russian people, sharing the Nativity news by song is an old and strong tradition. Children and groups of people go from house to house sometimes carrying a huge lighted star which is fastened to a long pole. The star is held high as the carolers process on their rounds.

In other places, carolers are dressed in costumes. They depict characters in the Christmas story. Three wise men in gorgeous robes, with shining crowns on their heads, carrying gifts are followed by shepherds dressed plainly in robes, made of blankets, wearing straw hats associated with farmers and invariably a Jewish peddler to depict where the event occurred. These are accompanied by two men carrying a miniature church about three feet long with windows. A look in these windows shows a beautiful creche.

In most places, groups of people go from house to house singing the beautiful carols which tell of the good news – the birth of the Christ Child!

How fortunate are the parishes in which the carolers still make their rounds bringing the joy. Children wait in starry eyed anticipation. Adults are also affected by this visit. These days we are fortunate to have recordings, radio, and all kinds of communications at our disposal. The music coming out of these may be better but nothing beats hearing it "live."

ST. JOSEPH

We are surprised to find that St. Joseph is found on the Saints' Calendar on only one day and this is on the Sunday following Christmas, when he is commemorated along with King David and his son, St. James, who was the stepbrother of Jesus.

When Joseph became betrothed to Mary, he did not know that because of his action he would face the humiliation of public disgrace, have to flee the country as a political refugee, be unable to return to his ancestral home, and be forced to live in a different city. Still, in all these unexpected developments, Joseph proved to be faithful in his obedience to God.

We learn about Joseph in Matthew. He was a righteous man. When the angel of the Lord appeared to him and told him to go ahead with his marriage to Mary because the child within her was of the Holy Spirit, Joseph did exactly what he was told. As we are told in Matt 1:24, he wasted no time whatsoever in complying with the command. Then when the child was born, he named him "Jesus" (which means "saviour") just as he was told to do.

Again, we read that Joseph wasted no time in complying with the command given to him by the angel who appeared to him and told him to take the child and the mother and to flee to Egypt. He got up immediately, in the middle of the night, and went. And he stayed in Egypt with the mother and child until the angel appeared the third time to tell him it was safe to return.

St. Joseph did not know what he was getting into but he did it all in obedience to the call of God; and all that he did, he did with a sense of immediacy. He was a righteous man, indeed!

The gospel does not tell us much more about St. Joseph, but tradition says that he was an older man when he took Mary as his wife and did not live until Jesus' crucifixion.

SHOULD COMBINE BOTH

Have you noticed that the same gospel is read at most of the Holy Days on which we commemorate Mary, the Mother of God? We read from Luke 10:38-42 concerning Mary and Martha on her Nativity, September 8/21, her Entry into the Temple, November 21/December 4, her Protection, October 1/14 and her Dormition, August 15/28.

The reading tells us of the stop that Jesus made in the home of two sisters, Mary and Martha, while He was on an arduous missionary trip. It was to be His last trip and it was not direct but He made many stops in towns and villages in Galilee, in Samaria and Judea. It tells us in 8:22 that He went through cities and villages teaching and journeying with His last stop to be in Jerusalem - his destination.

He stopped in Bethany at the home of Mary and Martha. Their parents were dead and as Martha was the older sister she acted as mistress of the house. She hustled around preparing a meal for her guests, for Jesus was not traveling alone, while Mary sat talking to Jesus. Martha needed Mary's help and she asked Jesus to excuse them. Jesus interfered by lovingly telling Martha that she was too full of care and worry, so much so that she forgot that there were other things in life. Jesus did not tell her that she had chosen a bad thing only that Mary had chosen a better one.

How can we apply this to our lives and involvement in the ministries of the church? Where should we put our priorities?

There are many Marthas in each parish. Perhaps, we are one. They represent those who serve in busy, active labor. And then there are the Marys, who serve Him in secret adoration, devotion and prayer. These are the ones who interrupt the making of perohi or whatever to attend church services. Each has their plate in Christ's Church and each win their blessing. But Christ, Himself declared Mary's way the more blessed. We may notice the Marthas more, but the Marys are closer to Him. One impression we must not take from this reading is that Christ wishes us to draw a contrast between labors and devotion. His rebuke was for those who make light of devotion and would call others away from it to a more active service.

The ideal life would be to work like Martha and worship like Mary. It is the loving service of Martha and the adoring prayers of Mary that complete the full ministry of the Body of Christ in this world. As we commemorate the archangels and angels this month, perhaps one lesson we should learn from them is that the best and truest life is one made up of both these forms of service - active labors and inward devotion.

ASTROLOGY - WRONG?

Almost every daily paper has a "horoscope" and many people will not start their day before checking to see what the stars have predicted for them.

This time of year, we read much about the stars, perhaps inspired by the reading from Matthew 2:1,2: "There came wise men from the east to Jerusalem saying, "Where is He that is born King of the Jews? for we have seen His star in the east, and are come to worship Him." Carols sung during this month on radio and in stores often mention the star, while the wise men are often identified as astrologers.

The Church teaches us that astrology, which examines the influence of the movement of the stars on the daily affairs of a person, can prove detrimental and even destructive if a person steers his life according to these pseudo-prophecies.

Way back in the Old Testament the Prophet Daniel told the King Nebuchadnezzer that only God that is in heaven can reveal the secrets for which he seeks answers. It is useless to ask wise men, astrologers, magicians or the soothsayers. (Daniel 2:27,28).

Then St. Gregory of Nyssa, who lived from 335-395, made a statement: "If we are but instruments of heavenly rotation, then we do not have free will. And if a man loses freedom, he loses everything."

Not long afterwards, St. John Chrysostom (347-407) made an observation: "This belief in stars is a foolish disbelief against God's omnipotence and creativity, for (it implies that) God is subjected to the star's power."

Augustine (354-430) was quite blunt: "Anyone who believes that our loving God would give power to stars in order to direct and govern our lives offends God's justice and love."

But perhaps St. Gregory the Great, who lived from 540-604, made the most statements concerning astrology: "Man was not made for the stars, but rather the stars for man, and if a star can be called the ruler of man, then man must be considered a slave of his own servants. God did not create the planets and stars with the intention that they should dominate man, but that they, like other creatures, should obey and serve him." Then he asked a very pertinent question, "Why is there such a diversity in the life of twins ... even though they were conceived in the same moment?"

Elder Moses of Optima gives us the best advice: "Do not pay attention to dreams or soothsayers or astrologers, but be guided by trust in the all-powerful grace of Jesus Christ."

SO FAMILIAR

The prophecy of Isaiah 7:14 is sung at very special times in our lives, among them weddings and ordinations. Why? It seems to be so Christmasy. It is!

REJOICE, O ISAIAH!
A VIRGIN IS WITH CHILD
AND SHALL BEAR A SON,
EMMANUEL
BOTH GOD AND MAN,
AND ORIENT IS HIS NAME.
MAGNIFYING HIM,
WE CALL THE VIRGIN BLESSED

It is a wonderful reminder of the Nativity of Our Lord and Saviour at important moments of our lives. The Virgin has become united to God by becoming His mother. In the same way, in the image of Mary, we accept and receive God, for He becomes incarnate (alive) in us through the Holy Spirit as we are told over and over again in the Christmas services: GOD IS WITH US! Our aim as Christians is to allow this to become apparent in our lives.

At the wedding, the couple became a miniature Church, a living cell of Christ's Body. The same is true in the ordination. This is a "great mystery" as we are reminded throughout the marriage ceremony.

FUNDS

ALASKA: Dorothy Burochonock, Ethel Watlock
MISSION: Ann Mizerak
POSTAGE: Anonymous, K. E. Petrochko,

Undique (from everywhere)

Every year we listen to the words: "Christ is born! Glorify Him!" Why do we use the present tense "is born" rather that "was born"? We use this because "is born" points to a new birth of Christ within us. As we sing in the hymn "Prepare your cave," we are told to sweep every sinful act from within ourselves and run out to meet Him! Christ is born right now! Christ is born right now in our hearts! Christ is born right now in the manger of our souls!

In the Christmas Eve service we are told: "When the Lord Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, the Magi came from the east and worshipped Him as incarnate God. (God in the flesh). Eagerly they opened their treasures and offered Him precious gifts: pure gold because He is the King of the ages; frankincense in that He is God of all and myrrh to the deathless one who was as dead for three days. Come, everyone let us worship Him who was born to save our souls."

Christmas is the only one of our great Holy Days which originated in the West, so it is not surprising that its celebration is more elaborate in the West. From it has come the Christmas wreaths, caroling, creches, etc.

The Christmas tree comes from medieval Europe, where it was originally known as a "Paradise Tree," a reminder that Christ's coming brings us back to Eden and recreates all things. This is reflected in a Tropar in our Orthodox Church: "Bethlehem, make ready, for Eden has been opened for all; Ephrata, be alert, for the Tree of Life has blossomed forth from the Virgin in the cave...".

As you enter church make the sign of the cross thoughtfully over your body, washing away the distractions of the world, the flesh and the devil. Make yourself open to the seed of God's truth.

Editor's Notes

It is hard to believe that a year has passed since my fateful fall off the ladder and my one month stay in the hospital. I have healed well and am wondering how many alarms the metal in my ankle will set off when I make my next air flight to Europe.

I am happy to announce that we have added three new members to our Packet Plan Family. Two of these are sponsored by a member of the parish. The cost for ten copies for a year would not even pay for a ticket to a sport event or a concert!

The Belarus Apple Pie in the September issue was by far the favorite recipe in 2004. I have received many ways that cooks, both male and female, have adapted or varied it. The latest is to substitute water for part of the butter. I tried it and it works! Belarus is a border country. I wonder which invading army left this delightful way to use apples.

I will soon be billing Packet Plan Members for the next year. I do appreciate the prompt reply I received last year.

Many years ago we had a column called "missionary-in-abstentia." It has evolved into others; but, as I was looking through back copies, I thought how appropriate it would be to place so many of you into this category. You have taken notice of my request and have been sending in gift subscriptions. You are helping to spread the word about Christ and His Holy Church. You are missionaries-in-abstentia. What better time of year than now to order gift subscriptions. Where else can you get 12 gifts for someone for $8? You will also help us because the more copies we print, the less it costs per copy.

We are in the Preparatory season - Advent - for the Nativity waiting for the Birth of Christ. Let's add that extra prayer in the morning or evening and prepare our souls as well as we are preparing our homes for this great event.

God Be With You,

Matushka Nina Stroyen

BIBLE QUIZ

1. In what Greek city did Silas and Timothy stay while St. Paul went on to Athens?
2. What city was home to Mary, Martha and Lazarus?
3. What city was the site of Jacob's famous dream?
4. What city was the birthplace of both David and Jesus?
5. What seaport in Asia did Paul walk to from Troas?
6. In what city did Paul address some of the most brilliant men of his time?
7. What famous city had Nebuchadnezzar as a ruler?

ANSWERS:
1. Berea (Acts 17:10-14)
2. Bethany (John 11)
3. Bethel (Genesis 28:10-22)
4. Bethlehem
5. Assos (Acts 20:13-14)
6. Athens (Acts 17)
7. Babylon (2 Kings 16:23-24)

PRESS FUND

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LIGHTER MOMENT

A Sunday School teacher was reading a Bible story to her students: "The man named Lot was warned to take his wife and flee out of the city, but his wife looked back and was turned to salt."

Tommy raised his hand and asked: "What happened to the flea?"



This recipe for Hospitality Cakes is a very old one. Its name is Chestnija Torte. I am told that the word chestnija has the same root as chestnovat, which means to treat. These cakes were given to carolers in the old country. The carolers put them into a bag and, when they finished their rounds, they divided the gifts, which they had been given, among themselves. These cakes were always a favorite for they had dates, which were rarely found in the village.

CHESTNIJA TORTE

1 1/2 cup flour
dash salt
1/4 tsp. baking powder
2 egg yolks
1/2 cup butter

<u>FILLING</u>

1/2 cup brown sugar
1/2 cup chopped dates
1/2 cup chopped walnuts
1 cup sour cream

Mix the flour, baking powder and salt together in a bowl. Work in butter until mixture looks like cornmeal. Add the lightly beaten egg yolks. Work in until dough holds together. Chill at least an hour. Meanwhile, make the filling. Mix the brown sugar, dates and walnuts. Add the sour cream.

When dough is ready, roll out as for pie crust. Cut into rounds to fit muffin tins, the smaller the better. Fit the rounds into the ungreased muffin tins, making little cups. Fill 3/4's full with filling. Bake in 350° oven for 30 to 45 minutes.

LIGHTER MOMENT

Little Bobby brought home a report card full of poor grades. "What have you to say about these grades?" demanded his mother. "Well, one thing for sure," replied Bobby, "You know I ain't cheating."

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PERIODICAL POSTAGE PAID

GOD IS WITH US. HE WILL NEVER ABANDON US.

THE WISE MEN

Although the Gospel of Matthew does not specify their [illegible]tion holds that there were three wise men – one for each gift. And, early as the sixth century, names were given to them, with physical attributes coming somewhat later. Thus, the bearer of gold was said to be Melchior, an elderly Persian with a long beard; a young and beardless Indian named Caspar offered fragrant frankincense, a black Arabian named Balthasar brought myrrh, the bitter gum resin valued for its medicinal properties.

En route home from China at the end of the 13th century, Marco Polo reported that he visited the wise men's graves near Tehran (in present Iran) – though a century earlier (1162) the Holy Roman emperor Frederick Barbarosa claimed to have moved their bodies to Germany for preservation in the cathedral in Cologne.

The most scholars will say about the wise men is that, being guided by the star, they were probably from Persia.

LIGHTER MOMENT

GENEALOGY IN 2004. A mother is explaining to her little girl about pictures in the family photo album. "This is the geneticist with your surrogate mother and here's your sperm donor and your father's clone. This is me holding you when you were just a frozen embryo. The lady with the troubled look on her face is your aunt. She's the family genealogist."

Home Bible Reading Schedule

DECEMBER 2004

1. Luke 20:1-8	16. Mark 9:10-16
2. Luke 20:9-18	17. Mark 9:33-41
3. Luke 20:19-26	18. Luke 14:1-11
4. Luke 12:32-40	**19. Matt 1:1-25**
5. Luke 17:12-19	20. Mark 9:42-10:1
6. Luke 20:27-44	21. Mark 10:2-12
7. Luke 21:12-19	22. Mark 10:11-16
8. Luke 21:5-11, 20-24	23. Mark 10:17-27
	24. Luke 2:1-20
9. Luke 21:28-33	25. Matt 2:1-12
10. Luke 21:37-22:8	**26. Matt 2:13-23**
11. Luke 13:18-29	27. Mark 10:46-52
12. Luke 14:16-24	28. Mark 11:11-23
13. Mark 8:11-21	29. Mark 11:23-26
14. Mark 8:22-26	30. Mark 11:27-33
15. Mark 8:30-34	31. Mark 12:1-12

BIBLE STUDY

Many people today are interested in genealogy. They are finding the internet a great help in tracing their family trees. Our reading for December 19 from Matthew 1:1-25 is the genealogy of Jesus. In this reading, St. Matthew traces Jesus back to Abraham and emphasizes His ancestry through Joseph. In contrast, St. Luke in his gospel traces Jesus' physical ancestors through His mother, Mary (Luke 3:23-37).

They wrote for different groups of people. St. Matthew had in mind a mainly Jewish audience, and he wanted to assert Jesus' credentials as the Messiah. The word Christ is the Greek equivalent of the Hebrew term, Messiah. To introduce Jesus (v.1) as "the son of David, the son of Abraham" called to mind the whole tradition of messianic prophecy. God had told Abraham that through him all nations would be blessed, and had promised David in Genesis 12:3; 2 Samuel 7:10-16 that his throne would endure forever.

In studying the Gospel according to St. Matthew, we would find that he alludes to the Old Testament more than any other book in the New Testament. He uses Jewish terms such as kingdom of heaven and assumes a knowledge of Jewish tradition and history. However, his Jewish focus wasn't exclusive, as can be seen in the presence of non-Jews such as Ruth and Rahab in Jesus's genealogy.

Like all the gospels, St. Matthew's shows Jesus as the savior of the world

ISAIAH'S PROPHESIES

The Book of Isaiah is rich in prophecies concerning Our Lord and Saviour. In it he tells us that:

the Saviour will be born of a virgin;

that before He comes there will appear in the wilderness a forerunner who will be preparing the world for His coming;

that He will be both God and man;

that He will begin His preaching in Galilee;

that He will be merciful and humble;

that He will teach;

that He will perform miracles;

that He will suffer for the sins of the people

that He will be victorious over death and the devil;

and call the heathens into the Church.